

Historical representations and Singapore students' ideas about the nature and purpose of history learning

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Abstract

This article contributes to debates on how the history curriculum should be organised (i.e., thematically, or chronologically). It also contributes to the limited empirical research that employs a sociocultural approach to history education and the limited empirical research on history education in Singapore. Drawing on semistructured interviews with seven Singapore participants on their ideas about the nature and purpose of learning history, this article explores the implications of bringing together the disciplinary and collective memory approach to history education on students' historical thinking and national identification.

Introduction

History education is one of the most common yet debatable mechanisms used in the continual process of establishing the modern nation-state. This can be seen in the history wars over the purpose, content, and form of history education in the USA (Park, 2021), Australia, New Zealand (Bell & Russell, 2021), and England (Peterson, 2016), notwithstanding others (Chia, 2012; Taylor & Guyver, 2012). For instance, when the Labour government introduced a compulsory national history curriculum, the Ministry of Education received more than 2,000 submissions from the public and various political parties on the Aotearoa New Zealand's histories curriculum draft (RNZ, 2021b). Analysis of the submissions revealed significant disagreements about whether and how colonial violence should be included (O'Malley & Kidman, 2018). Some submitters thought that remembering these difficult histories would support reconciliation and healing and help New Zealand forge broad national unity, while others called for a "one nation"-focused approach (Neill et al., 2022, p. 132) and expressed concern about the curriculum casting the past "into

villains and victims” (ACT, n.d.), which they contend could lead to divisions and separatist sentiments. These fights over competing versions of history relate to different groups’ societal imaginings and depictions of the past and often spill over into debates on the content and form of the history curriculum, such as whether the history curriculum should be organised thematically or chronologically and the extent to which historical thinking skills should be emphasised (Peterson, 2016).

These tensions are related to different conceptions of what it means to “do history” and what history education is for. The disciplinary approach to history education sees careful analysis of the remnants of the past as important to historical understanding (Seixas, 1996; Vansledright, 2008, 2014) and the role of school history as imparting students with the discipline’s conceptual tools and methods. Historical understanding follows from searching out evidence, assessing sources for what they may offer, making sense of the perspectives of the source’s author, and judging an author’s reliability in making reputable claims to answer a historical question (Vansledright, 2014). However, some fear that a disciplinary approach would weaken nationalistic ties and citizens’ devotion to the nation-state. They see a singular knowledge of the nation’s past as crucial to social cohesion and prefer teaching a grand national narrative that links the past to current society (Clark, 2009; Samuelson, 2017). In contrast with the disciplinary approach, where complexities and contradictions are revealed in the study of historical sources, the collective memory approach offers a singular, unproblematic, and dogmatic view of history (Samuelson, 2017). While the collective memory approach can contribute to national identity formation (Samuelson, 2017), it limits opportunities for students to develop the cognitive abilities needed to navigate the information-laden, pluralistic democracies of the 21st century (Vansledright, 2008).

In Singapore, disciplinary and collective memory approaches to history education co-exist in the history and social studies curricula. Students are taught to “do history” and analyse and evaluate historical sources, but also to identify with the nation by learning the national narrative (Afandi & Baildon, 2010; Boon & Gopinathan, 2005; Chia, 2012; Han, 2007; M. H. Lee, 2012; Seng, 1998). While studies have been done on how historical representations and different approaches to history education can affect students’ historical thinking, none has explored the implications of bringing both approaches

together in the history and social studies curricula. This article draws on semistructured interviews with seven youths in their late adolescence to explore how an eclectic combination of disciplinary and collective memory approaches might have affected the Singapore participants' historical thinking and national identification. It contributes to debates on how the history curriculum should be organised (i.e., thematically or chronologically) and the extent to which historical thinking should be emphasised. It also contributes to the limited empirical research that employs a sociocultural approach to history education and the limited empirical research on history education in Singapore.

In line with the sociocultural approach to historical education, I define young people's understanding of history as a social construct based on their ideas about history and historical accounts and the purpose of history. These ideas are imbued with cultural meanings derived from the local social context, affecting participants' choice of cultural tools when engaging in historical activities. Drawing on the findings of the study, I argue that a thematic, comparative form of historical representation, such as that used in the Singapore history and social studies curriculum, may support conflicting but worthwhile aims of promoting national identification and disciplinary thinking, as well as knowledge of national and world history. In the next section, I outline international debates about disciplinary and collective memory approaches to history education before introducing the analytical framework of this study.

Debates about the disciplinary and collective memory approaches to history education

Although there is no single, agreed-upon definition of historical thinking (Lévesque & Clark, 2018), researchers generally understand historical thinking as an intellectual process that involves understanding elements in the structure of the discipline, such as significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, and empathy and moral judgement (Seixas, 1996). These disciplinary elements are always problematic and incomplete, yet critical to a deep understanding of history (Lévesque & Clark, 2018; Seixas, 1996; Vansledright, 2014). Scholars argue that teaching history as a form of inquiry develops students' historical thinking and is key to critical citizenship (Lévesque & Clark, 2018; Vansledright, 2008; Wineburg, 2001). Historical thinking develops students' ability and disposition to arrive independently at

reasonable, informed opinions and critically examine traces and accounts of the past (Seixas, 1996). It also teaches people “to make choices, to balance opinions, to tell stories, and to become uneasy—when necessary—about the stories” (Wineburg, 2001, p. 9). When taught as a form of inquiry, history education helps students become better-informed citizens who can approach issues with an inquiring mind and exercise sound judgement when presented with new information or different perspectives (Lévesque & Clark, 2018; Seixas, 1996).

However, the disciplinary approach to history education is sometimes deemed antithetical to nation-building, with countries preferring to teach a grand national narrative that shows how the current society evolved unproblematically from past events, persons, and ideas so that students can develop their national identity (Samuelson, 2017). However, the collective memory approach can be counterproductive to critical citizenship and national identification. An exploratory study on how working historians and high-school seniors evaluated primary and secondary sources when considering questions of historical evidence found that students’ beliefs in history as the past rather than one representation of the past limited their ability to determine the validity of competing truth claims in the discipline (Wineburg, 1991). A study with ethnic Estonians about their history as the USSR was undergoing the final stages of its disintegration in 1991 found that all the interviewees knew two accounts of the events of 1940 that resulted in Estonia becoming a part of the USSR (Wertsch, 2000). Almost without exception, the interviewees asserted that official accounts were false and the unofficial ones were true. These studies indicate that a collective memory approach that provides a sanitised version of the past may hinder the development of critical thinking and fail to obtain citizens’ emotional commitment.

The two approaches to history education often translate into two forms of historical representation. Historical representations derive from semiotic devices such as stories or narratives, strategies of argumentation, and mythic structures (Wertsch, 1997). Master narratives are particularly suited for the collective memory approach because they naturalise the imaginations of nations and nationalism and provide an unproblematic national myth of origin to help citizens make sense of their past, present, and future as a cultural community. Although a sense of chronology is crucial to historical concepts such as continuity and change, the focus on narratives has given

history education a bad name, with students seeing history as “an endless stream of dates, facts, names, and events” (White, 1995, p. 160). White (1995) advocates for thematic approaches to historical representation, which forces teachers and students to focus on the core concepts of the discipline rather than content coverage that does not distinguish between historical facts that are relevant and important to know from the peripheral ones. Turan (2020) concurs, arguing that a thematic approach “examines a series of events under a particular concept and helps students develop questioning skills and a better understanding of cause-and-effect relationships” (p. 207).

Historical representations as cultural tools

This article conceptualises historical representation as an important cultural tool that shapes accounts of the past that individuals are likely to imagine. A cultural tool is broadly defined by Barton and Levstik (2004) as “anything and everything that people use” (p. 23). It can be physical objects, representational systems, or even concepts, which shape how people perceive and engage with the world. The tools are “cultural” because they are inherently socially situated as mediational means between actions and contexts (Wertsch, 1997). Cultural tools link action (including the mental action of thinking) and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which such actions occur (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Wertsch, 1997).

While cultural tools such as historical representations can help organise experiences and solve problems, they constrain how people see the world (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Wertsch, 1997). Barton’s comparative study on elementary children’s understanding of historical change in Northern Ireland and the USA found that American children tend to explain historical changes in terms of individual achievement and national progress, while Irish children were more likely to base their explanation on social structures or institutions (Barton, 2001b). In another comparative study, Barton (2001c) found that American students were more likely to see the purpose of history as learning about the origin of their country and their own place within it, while Irish children tended to see the purpose of history as learning about others who are different from themselves. In both studies, Barton attributed the differences in children’s thinking to the historical representations in schools and throughout the broader culture in each country. In the USA, history is typically represented

in a narrative of national progress based on individual achievements to facilitate national identification (Barton, 2001a). American students are often exposed to “the history of us, the history of our nation” (Barton, 2001c, p. 98) in a narrative of national development that relates history to their sense of identity. However, in conflict-affected Northern Ireland, where conflicting historical narratives between the Unionists and Nationalists co-exist, schools avoided linking history to national identity. They preferred a more “analytic” (Barton, 2001b, p. 899) approach. Historical representations in Northern Ireland are thus static portrayals of different societies at different times. These comparative studies suggest that exposure to historical representations that vary across national settings can affect students’ understanding of history in vastly different manners.

A review of sociocultural studies on historical thinking indicates that existing studies are based in democratic countries with strong European heritage, such as Northern Ireland, the USA, Estonia, and New Zealand (Barton, 2001a, 2001c; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Tulviste & Wertsch, 1994). Research on history education in Singapore is extremely limited, and none adopts a sociocultural approach to historical thinking. While many commented on the impact of the Singapore Story (i.e., the state-constructed master narrative of the nation) on students’ critical thinking (e.g., Han, 2007), none examined the impact of thematic teaching and issue-based historical representations on students’ historical thinking. Research shows that history education in East and Southeast Asia is distinct from that of Western contexts, with stronger government control over history curricula and textbooks and history education serving “a more explicit moralizing function in the development of national identity” (Baildon & Afandi, 2018, p. 38). However, there is a lack of international history education research in non-Western contexts that investigates how contextual and curricular differences, such as the narrative templates used in history classrooms, shape young people’s understanding of history (Baildon & Afandi, 2018).

History education in Singapore

Since its independence in 1965, education has been a key lever for the Singapore state to deal with nation-building challenges, such as developing human capital and national identity (Afandi & Lim, 2022). Researchers concur that the Singapore state has historically leveraged history education

to construct national identity and inculcate citizenship values (Afandi & Baidon, 2010; Boon & Gopinathan, 2005; Chia, 2012; Han, 2007; M. H. Lee, 2012; Seng, 1998). However, the focus on building up a literate and technically skilled workforce to ensure Singapore's economic survival saw greater emphasis on economically relevant subjects, such as science, mathematics, and other technical subjects in the initial years of independence (circa. 1965–1978) (Afandi & Lim, 2022). Despite policymakers' recognition of history education as important to the development of a Singapore identity, it had little market value, so no effort was made to change the secondary history curriculum. Students studied ancient world civilisations in lower secondary years and Singapore history “as a brief appendage to the history of Malaya” in upper secondary levels (Afandi & Lim, 2022, p. 385). The history curriculum was finally reviewed in 1982 after the 1979 Goh Report heralded the transition from a survival-driven phase to an efficiency-driven phase (1979–1997) in Singapore's education system (Afandi & Lim, 2022). The revised history curriculum was more Singapore-centric and focused on “the growth of Singapore from a tiny trading port to a modern metropolis” (Tay, 1983, quoted in Afandi & Lim, 2022, p. 386). It also required a more critical and interdisciplinary approach involving historical sources, inquiry, and fieldwork and marked the first shift from knowledge acquisition to conceptual understandings of big ideas in history education (Lee, S. B., 2017, cited in Afandi & Lim, 2022, p. 394).

By the late 1990s, policymakers became increasingly concerned about young Singapore's limited knowledge of the country's history and momentum towards teaching historical thinking and citizenship education picked up. In 1997, the Ministry of Education launched the National Education (NE) programme to equip young Singaporeans with “the basic attitudes, values, and instincts which make them Singaporeans” (Lee, H. L., 1997, cited in Afandi & Lim, 2022, p. 383) and to develop national cohesion. The NE programme prioritised disseminating history lessons to rescue the young from their “ignorance of history” and to pass on the “cultural DNA” of the earlier generations (Hong, 2002, p. 545). In this way, NE provided the vehicle for the official historiography of the Singapore Story to enter the school curriculum (Chia, 2012). The lower secondary history curriculum came to be framed around the Singapore Story, where the People Action Party (PAP) leadership's entry into public life provided the reference point from which the present

is to be understood.¹ The story begins with the difficult years of Japanese Occupation after the British surrender of Singapore when locals realised that they could only count on themselves to defend the country. The subsequent period of nationalist agitation, self-government, and political struggles between the communists and the PAP leaders culminated in a short-lived merger and eventual separation of Singapore from Malaysia. Next came a period of racial and religious unrest, which the ruling party successfully managed. By tracing how a dispersed and heterogeneous population became an established and unified community, the Singapore Story fashions the disparate population into a nation (Hong & Huang, 2008). The state narrative was reinforced in public spaces such as the National Museum of Singapore, popular local television drama series, and conserved buildings and areas. Hong and Huang (2008) noted that “the plotting of the PAP story as Singapore’s history has not been seriously challenged either by professional historians or by former political actors” (p. 50).

At the same time the NE programme was launched, the Singapore government also launched a national initiative known as *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* (TSLN) (Afandi & Lim, 2022). TSLN described a nation of thinking and committed citizens capable of meeting the challenges of the future and an education system geared to the needs of the 21st century. The competing demands of NE and TSLN plagued history education in Singapore with satisfying two contradictory agendas: it had to inculcate students with predetermined messages from the state-constructed master narrative of the nation while developing students’ critical thinking.

With TSLN’s emphasis on higher-order thinking skills deemed essential to help young Singaporeans cope with the demands of the 21st century economy, the history curriculum shifted away from direct knowledge transmission towards an appreciation for the subject as an academic discipline and historical inquiry (Afandi & Lim, 2022). Across all educational levels where history was taught (either as an independent subject or part of combined humanities), the revised history syllabus emphasised inquiry-based learning, the teaching of historical concepts (such as evidence, cause, and significance), and an enhanced focus on source-work methodology (Afandi & Lim, 2022), with elements of historical thinking, such as the interpretation and evaluation of historical sources, assessed.

With TSLN and NE, the Ministry of Education introduced combined humanities in 2001, which required all upper secondary students to pursue social studies and one elective humanities subject (either geography/history/literature).² Before expanding the scope of Singapore history in the lower secondary history curriculum in 1983 and making social studies a compulsory subject, a student could complete secondary education with very limited learning of Singapore history (Afandi & Lim, 2022). The introduction of social studies freed up the upper secondary and pre-university history curricula to focus on regional and international history, such as the Cold War and the history of Southeast Asian states. In social studies, students studied Singapore's policy approaches in relation to other countries' policies. For example, to highlight the importance of preserving racial and religious harmony, students learn about ethnic and religious conflicts in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland before they examine Singapore. In the upper secondary and pre-university history curriculum, students still learn about Singapore's history, but it is not taught as a linear national narrative. Rather, Singapore is studied as part of the cross-comparative study of countries in the Southeast Asian region. Students also learn about the purpose and nature of citizenship education in Singapore as part of the country's nation-building strategy.

Methods

Having traced how tensions arising from the TSLN's dual goals of national identity and critical citizenship manifested in an eclectic combination of disciplinary and collective memory approaches in the Singapore history and social studies curricula, this section discusses how the study was carried out. In sociocultural analysis, human actions (including mental actions) are seen as closely related to the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which the actions occur (Wertsch, 1997). Case-study design is thus useful since the boundaries between the mental actions of participants and the Singapore context are not evident (Yin, 2009).

This study uses the single-case-study design to explore the influence of the social context on seven Singapore youths' understanding of history. Data were collected in 2013, during which participants were in their late adolescence. Young people in their middle and late adolescence (15–20) are a neglected group in the historical thinking literature, even though greater

maturity in cognitive and psychological abilities can influence their historical understanding (Vansledright, 1997), especially their ability to understand the constructed nature of historical knowledge (Hofer, 2001). Additionally, research participants of existing studies on history education in Singapore were all secondary school students. None investigated pre-university history students, who encountered a very different kind of history learning from primary and secondary students, one free from textbooks. All seven participants had comparable academic performance in their pre-university history examinations. They were Singapore citizens who had completed 6 years of primary school education, at least 4 years of secondary education, and 3 years of pre-university history education in Singapore. In other words, they experienced the 2006 lower secondary history syllabus, where the Singapore Story was taught, the 2008 combined humanities syllabus, where social studies took a thematic, comparative approach that offered students snapshots of Singapore's nation-building challenges, and the 2006 GCE "A" level history syllabus, where Singapore history was studied as part of a cross-comparative study of countries in the Southeast Asian region.

I invited shortlisted participants to join the study voluntarily and conducted an hour-long semistructured interview with each participant. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following Yin's (2009) recommendation to have data analysis follow the theoretical propositions that led to the case study, I drew on Wertsch's theory of mediated action and Barton's research on historical representations in the USA and Northern Ireland to develop two postulations. First, students' identification with elements of the past to develop their personal, familial, and/or national identities is likely derived from their exposure to the Singapore Story (i.e., a narrative of national progress and individual achievements) (Barton, 2001c). Second, thematic approaches to historical representation, which parallels the snapshot approach in Northern Ireland, likely influenced their analytic stance, such as analysing historical information to understand cause-and-effect relationships, developing generalisations, or discussing the process of creating historical accounts (Barton, 2001c). Following the pattern-matching analytic process, I compared the findings from an initial transcript against my initial proposition about students' understanding of history and revised accordingly (Yin, 2009). The revised proposition is then compared against other transcripts and repeated as necessary.

In the next section, I present key findings from my participants on their understanding of history.

History as perspectives

Studies on students' understanding of historical accounts show that novice students treat accounts as given stories that are just "there". More advanced students can see that the past is not fixed (P. Lee & Shemilt, 2003). Participants' understanding of history as accounts written from different perspectives suggests that they generally understood that viewpoints and selection are legitimate and necessary features of historical accounts and thus held a rather advanced understanding of the nature of history (P. Lee & Shemilt, 2003).

Participants were largely aware that the secondary history curriculum, expressed in textbooks, served as a means for the state to transmit desired values and merely reflected one perspective. Even as they replicated the textbook's perspective for their examinations, students did not blindly subscribe to its perspective. For example, Iman saw history as "what happened in the past based on one perspective" and highlighted his secondary social studies textbook as an example of a historical account that is "geared towards something" and "meant to drive you somewhere". He pointed out that the textbook is the product of the writer "pick[ing] what they think is best for the students" before "giv[ing] it out" to "drive us to think that Singapore is such a good society".

Because they saw history as accounts written from different perspectives, all the participants accepted that different accounts of the same piece of history are possible and could reconcile these differences. When asked why differing accounts of the past could exist, Melissa noted that when one looks at historical accounts, "there will always be duality because it really does depend on individual's perceptions and perspectives". Xiaoli felt that, because individuals are "influenced by their perception and what they have seen from the past", they have different interpretations of what happened. However, while these participants did not see historical accounts as copies of the past, they implied that accounts are selective on someone's whims, rather than in virtue of some questions.

Michelle and Iman were more advanced in their understanding. Michelle understood that accounts must answer questions and contrary accounts of the

same topics may emerge when they address different, but equally worthwhile, questions about the past (P. Lee & Shemilt, 2003). She noted that, sometimes, historical accounts could differ because historians ask different questions about the past:

Interviewer: Can two historians give two different accounts of the past?

Michelle: Yes, definitely. Because people have opposing views about a single isolated event. One historian may view it as a cause, while another may see it as a consequence, so the views may conflict.

For Michelle, “history is more than just looking at the past”:

I think the past falls under the broad category of history, but history is more than just looking at the past. It is more of studying and interpreting it from different points of view and using what you have studied and the data from the events to impact the present.

Her responses reflected an understanding of the criterion-based nature of disciplinary history, particularly the emphasis on evidence. Michelle also noted that historical accounts could differ because historians apply different criteria for significance:

I think that sometimes historical events might arise from a few factors and contributing causes, so you cannot just pin one event to a certain cause; they also depend on how historians view these events. Like historians could see an event as more catastrophic due to quantity [of lives lost], say there are more deaths in this event, so it is more significant. But another could say that a different event is more significant because it was motivated by national security concerns.

Similarly, Iman’s understanding of history and historical accounts was more advanced than the rest. His response reflected an understanding of the selective nature of historical accounts and the epistemological limits of history:

What other people think may not be what I think about history. We may talk about the same context, but how we talk about it and portray it can be very contrasting or different.

Iman further explained that accounts “can only be based on what he [the author] knows, what he believes in, what he sees and what other people tell

him". He understood that the construction of historical accounts involves the historian selecting and filtering evidence about the past through his/her lenses and that a viewpoint and selection are legitimate and necessary features of historical accounts.

The Santayana rationale: Learning from the past

Existing studies show that adolescent students often cite the Santayana rationale when asked about the purpose of history education. In an exploratory study on 5th-grade, 8th-grade, and high-school American students' ideas about the purpose of studying history, participants placed considerable faith in learning from historical misjudgements (Vansledright, 1997), and none evaluated the ability to learn from the past. Similarly, my participants generally saw history as providing a guide for the present and future, thus invoking the Santayana rationale—those who fail to learn past lessons are condemned to repeat them. Ali's response is representative of most participants who spoke of policy lessons as if history was now under control (Seixas, 1993):

History is like a lesson of the past. It provides an insight into what happened in the past, the factors that led to the events, and the lessons behind it. Like whatever policies or actions anyone takes today, they will consider what happened in the past. If they take this action, what would happen, if they take that action what would happen, so using history, they will decide the best course of action.

However, in contrast with the two studies, participants generally demonstrated a rather advanced understanding of history and attempted to evaluate the rationale. Iman, for example, highlighted the limits of history's predictive value:

The present is the present as we see it. Things can be very unpredictable. That's one thing we can say is the weaknesses of history. You can predict as much as you want based on what history tells you, but as it is today, everything is so unpredictable.

Others drew parallels between the past and the present to contextualise the lessons that could be learnt. Melissa highlighted how her historical knowledge of Stalin supported her understanding of Putin when she read news about him. She observed that Putin "feels the need to portray himself in a very masculine way like the way Stalin did" and how "it makes sense because you

see him [Putin] doing a lot of the same things his predecessors did to create a cult of personality”. She noted, “we can understand why he would actually do something like that. Because it proved effective in the past, he did these things to consolidate his power. So, you understand his behavior, and it makes a lot more sense.”

Like Melissa, John drew on his fund of historical knowledge to contextualise aspects of the present (Seixas, 1993):

When you compare what is happening now and what has happened in the past, you see why certain things worked out in certain ways and why they won't work out now. Let's say a government wants to adopt a very communist approach to everything. There will definitely be a historical reference point that they can look to and see how communist they want to be.

Their ideas about the purpose of history demonstrated more complexities than Ali's in that they did not draw a direct, developmental connection between past events and the present (Seixas, 1993). Rather, their learning from the past derived from its contribution to understanding the present and possible consequences for different courses of action. Overall, compared to the American students in Vansledright's (1997) study, the Singapore participants seemed to take a more analytical stance towards history.

Understanding our origins

In Vansledright's study on American students' ideas about the purposes of studying American history, the “quest for origins” and “history as a part in forming a self-identity” were marked rationales students cited (Vansledright, 1997). Older students were more likely to generate these two closely connected rationales (Vansledright, 1997). Similarly, most participants cited the “understanding our origin” rationale.

While some participants focused on their personal identity, others discussed how historical narratives bound people together. For instance, Siti contended that “[h]istory impacts people because we need to understand what we are today, and to do that, we need to understand where we came from”. For Siti, history learning serves a personal purpose, but for Xiaoli, learning about the past is crucial for nation-building. She noted that the purpose of history is to, first and foremost, “bind people of different cultures together with a story of

how we became". Ali cited the Singapore Story as he explained how learning about the past could teach Singaporeans to be more appreciative of their prosperous present:

History teaches us how we came about, for example, Singapore's history and how Singapore became a third-world to a first-world country. It teaches us to appreciate what we have now and what the nation did.

Regardless of their focus on personal or national histories, participants' responses indicated that narratives are crucial to their identification. "Stories" provide a chain of events occurring in a particular temporal order that helps participants see where they came from.

Building connections with others

Interestingly, the Singapore participants also cited a unique rationale: "building connections with others". Although Singapore participants saw the purpose of history as giving them a sense of identity, they also saw history as exposing them to people's lives elsewhere (Barton, 2001c), which helps them build relationships with others. Iman, Siti, and Michelle shared that their historical knowledge provided meaningful conversation topics and enabled them to build common ground with others:

I just went on this trip and met someone from America, but he was originally from Vietnam. So, he told me about his life story and everything, how his parents were in the Vietnam War, and how they made a living in America. I was very involved in the story because I knew what happened in the Vietnam War, and I understood many things, and he was very surprised because I knew about his history.

Participants also thought historical thinking skills, such as empathy and perspective-taking, helped them connect with others. For example, Iman thought learning history helped him better understand people's motivations and decisions:

When you learn history, you don't just learn about the past, but you also learn about the people's motives and why things happened. What is more interesting is when some people can actually put themselves in the situation of these people. Like you don't just study Stalin or Truman, you don't just study whomever that person is. You put yourself in their shoes, as a president of this

country, what do you think I would do for the interest of my people, for my self-interest perhaps as well?

However, connecting with others did not always mean agreement. Sometimes, it could mean identifying with the subjects of conversations. Xiaoli disagreed with her mother's negative portrayal of Chinese immigrants at her workplace. She lamented how her mother, like other Singaporeans, "did not respect these people (migrants) ... and forgot that there are good and bad people". She felt that history helped her understand other people's points of view, made her "slower to judge", "assess the situation better", become more "compassionate", and "try to reason out why people do the way they do". For Xiaoli, being unable to empathise is particularly dangerous for a multiracial society like Singapore because it can lead to "a lot of anger in the community" and "stereotypes". Similarly, Melissa highlighted the value of empathy in history education, which teaches them to look beyond the surface because "not everything is what it seems" and "something which seems wrong to you doesn't necessarily mean that it's wrong [to others]".

Different forms of historical representation and impact on students' historical thinking and national identification

This study contributes to debates on how the history curriculum could be organised (i.e., thematically or chronologically) and confirms sociocultural theories that people's historical thinking is linked to cultural, institutional, and historical contexts (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Wertsch, 1997). It also contributes to the limited international history education research that highlights how contexts and curricula influence young people's historical thinking (Baildon & Afandi, 2018). Specifically, this study explored how Singapore's eclectic approach to history education, where disciplinary and collective memory approaches co-exist in the school curriculum, influenced pre-university youths' understanding of history and its purpose.

Participants in this study simultaneously held analytic and identification stances, and the principal cultural tool at their disposal when they described their understanding of history was the historical representations they encountered in school. The narrative of national progress and individual achievements in the Singapore Story likely influenced students to see the purpose of history as learning about their origins and that of the nation. Their responses indicated

that narratives and stories that linked the present and the past are important to their search for identification. However, in contrast with the American students in Barton's studies, the Singapore participants were more analytical and advanced in their historical understanding. Participants were aware of the state agenda driving the history and social studies curricula in schools and that textbooks merely reflected one perspective. They understood that the past is not fixed and evaluated the Santayana rationale. Their accounts also demonstrated strong tendencies to compare and contextualise lessons from the past. This article contends that their propensities towards comparisons and a more analytical stance are likely due to the thematic approach to historical representation.

However, Singapore's thematic approach to historical representation is different from Northern Ireland's in two ways: first, it involves extensive and deliberate comparisons with other countries and contextualisation to derive lessons learnt, and second, it is designed to enhance identification with the national community, rather than avoid it. In contrast to the history curriculum in Northern Island, which focused on topics and people far removed in time and space from themselves, the thematic approach to historical representation in Singapore's history and social studies curricula purposively related Singapore to other countries through comparisons. For example, students learn about different Southeast Asian countries' approaches to building national unity, then engage in a comparative analysis of the approaches they find to be more effective. Though structurally different from a historical narrative, the comparative, thematic approach transmits the same lessons of Singapore being "an economic, political and social experiment that has worked" (Hong and Huang, 2008, p. 17). Thus, regardless of the forms of historical representation used in the Singapore curricula, they all encourage students to identify with a progressive and successful national community.

Nonetheless, participants' responses suggest that a thematic, comparative approach to historical representation may be a plausible solution to students' complaints that "studying their nation's past is dull and repetitive" (Clark, 2009, p. 745) and teachers' desire for the history curriculum to offer a broader view of the world. Participants found school history interesting, unlike the American students in previous studies. They highlighted the subject's usefulness in helping them empathise and connect with others different from themselves. As participants' discussion about how history taught them to

relate to others indicates, while the identification stance could create problems such as “heritage, amateur history, the abuse of history” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 60), it could potentially contribute to a participatory democracy by encouraging individuals to work for the common good. This study only involved seven adolescents, so the conclusions are tentative. However, the findings are promising and suggest that a thematic, comparative form of historical representation may support conflicting but worthwhile aims of promoting national identification, disciplinary thinking, and knowledge of national and world history. A precondition, though, is that students must develop the historical skills of contextualisation in tandem with comparison to avoid an unfair demonisation of other nations’ pasts and to develop the ability to draw valid lessons and come to reasoned judgement.

What the findings of this study imply for the implementation of Aotearoa New Zealand’s histories is that a focus on historical thinking skills is valuable and can support evidence-based understandings of how the past influenced the present (Sheehan & Ball, 2020), even when a singular version of a country’s past is being transmitted. In the context of Aotearoa, where a series of contested histories reflecting different perspectives is going to be taught, historical thinking can “enable young people to critique historical narratives, argue points of view based on verifiable evidence, understand how historians interpret the past and develop the capacity to think independently” (Sheehan, 2023, p. 209). Additionally, a thematic, comparative approach to historical representation involving a thematic and comparative understanding of New Zealand’s past in relation to other countries in the region and world could potentially address criticisms that the Aotearoa New Zealand’s histories curriculum left out large chunks of Aotearoa’s history (RNZ, 2021a), is too narrowly focused on the country and would bore the students (for example, see Kronast, 2021), without compromising on the need for the new history curriculum to inform a revised national identity for the country.

Notes

1. The Lower Secondary History Syllabuses were updated most recently in 2021. The new syllabuses set the study of Singapore’s history within the context of various shifts in Singapore’s political statuses, whether as part of the pre-colonial Melaka sultanate, or the British and Japanese

empires. Regardless, the master narrative of the Singapore Story continues to constitute at least half of the teaching content.

2. There have been further syllabi changes to reflect a stronger focus on inquiry-based learning and disciplinary concepts in the teaching of humanities subjects (namely history, geography, and social studies) in Singapore since 2012. For history, new syllabus changes were initiated at the launches of the Upper Secondary History Syllabus in 2013, the Lower Secondary History Syllabus in 2014, and the A-Level History Syllabus in 2015, but the participants in this study have not experienced the new syllabi.

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